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School of the Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University

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LAST STAND AT BIG THUNDER MOUNTAIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May 2006

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Abstract

LAST STAND AT BIG THUNDER MOUNTAIN

By David Herbert

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

I seek to pose questions about what people overlook or don't consider when viewing art in order to interpret what they see. When working on a project, I purposely retain the effect of my hand. The false crudeness is enhanced by my use of seemingly impoverished materials. This is akin to seeing the fishing wire holding up the miniature spaceship as it flies through the sky.

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Last Stand at Big Thunder Mountain

I take iconic objects from popular culture that have already gone through several resolutions and rebuild them. I recast them into my own narratives taking along the baggage from their previous lives.

I have been a film fanatic since my dad first took me to the Friday afternoon matinee. There was something about going into the darkened theater in the middle of the day, being transported to another world for 90 minutes and then emerging back into the daylight.

Before grad school, I was primarily a video artist. I had done a handful of sculptures in my life and created several props that appeared in my videos, but I was relatively ignorant of most sculptural concerns and practices. My video work was involved with basic signs and symbols both personal and universal. I was defining personal symbols or redefining universal symbols through short narratives. The videos included hand drawn cartoon elements with which I would interact as a performer in the live-action video.

At the time, I understood contemporary sculpture through Tom Friedman's work. With his work I recognized that content is both representation and material. So it was not just what you made, but what you made the work out of that was important. For example Friedman works such as *Untitled* 1999 (a self portrait made out sugar cubes), *Hot Balls*

1992 (a sculpture made out of stolen toy balls), and *Untitled* 2000 (a gruesomely exploded self portrait made of construction paper) were seminal for me.

Arriving at a sculpture school I decided to focus on making sculptural work. I decided to use symbols from popular culture that had both personal and universal meaning as a starting point. The sculptures were made out of specifically non-archival material with which I had worked before (cardboard, latex house paint and hot glue). I used the likeness of Abraham Lincoln, Skylab, the Space Shuttle, and the Great Plains Buffalo, recreating them to look as if they had been profoundly injured. This series of sculptures was called *The Curse*. The title also referred to the fact that they were made out of materials not meant to last.

Overall, this series shaped my practice. Each piece was started and completed in a relatively short period of time. They each began as a drawing and retained a rough and hand drawn look as a completed sculpture. Within this template I created each piece with the exact same materials. Ultimately though, this way of working didn't hold my interest.

Concurrent with the sculptural work, I built a small movie set in my studio. It was a miniature room set for a video called *Parcel*. For this video I made a cardboard prop decapitated horse's head, a direct reference to a disturbing scene in *The Godfather*. Using this movie reference caused a major breakthrough for me. I realized that I could be making sculptures that use movies as source material. As film plays a major part in the critical cultural discussion of our time, so to is it a perfectly relevant subject for my work.

The first resulting piece was *VHS*, a recreation of the video tape of *2001: A Space Odyssey* blown up to the size of the monolith from the same movie (roughly 8 feet tall). It

was similar to my previous work in that it was a single object and a single action built in a handmade sort of style. *2001*, Stanley Kubrick's utopian vision of the future completed almost 40 years ago, is now contained on a single cassette. That cassette has become virtually obsolete by the time Kubrick's future was to have taken place. Kubrick projected his vision of how the future might look using the clean modern style of his time to carry through to what is now my time.

From *VHS*, I produced additional sculptures that were based on sets from the movie, *2001*. I was interested in Kubrick's vision of the future which by now, is the unrealized past. Kubrick was an demanding director who wouldn't compromise to achieve his vision. This lack of compromise is why his work resulted in films that act as cultural signifiers. As a curious counterpoint, my work revolves around pushing the limits of compromise and what results. Throughout my practice, I have been interested in what I can accomplish as an individual with limited resources. With these sets, I directly confronted this compromise, attempting to recreate portions of Kubrick's multi-million dollar vision of the future by creating my hundred-dollar versions.

I made sets of three pivotal points in the movie: the centrifuge, the airlock, and the brain room. I created the sets out of cheap raw materials in a rough hewn and imperfect way while trying to best capture my vision of his vision.

While, building a physical object that represents a narrative (like a set), I started to think about Disneyland. The enveloping completeness of the utopian illusion created by the Imagineers (Disney's term for the engineers and designers that designed Disneyworld) is amazing. Every bit of the landscape, architecture, rides and pathways are sculpted to

form a believable experience of being in this magical place. I recognize Disneyworld as a unique example of a narrative sculptural experience. A viewer walks through the park or rides on one of the rides, they are told a story by their surroundings as if walking through a movie. For these reasons I next chose Disneyland as my source material.

The first in this series is the Disneyland riverboat called the “Mark Twain”.

Disney’s version of the riverboat is idealized and highly ornamented. The function of the “Mark Twain” is to ferry passengers on a riverboat tour around Huck Finn Island. My sculpture, titled *Mississippi Ark*, is perched atop a mound of mud. The riverboat is made from the same variety of materials used to make the *2001* sets. These materials adequately, approximately and pathetically represented the actual materials of the “Mark Twain”.

I regard the riverboat as a second tier icon of America. By placing it on the mound of mud I suggest an association with Werner Herzog’s movie, *Fitzcaraldo*, in which the main character pulls a river boat up the side of a mountain. By juxtaposing the Disney/American icon with this scene from the film the clash makes new meaning.

My next icon was Sleeping Beauty’s Castle, the centerpiece for the park and symbol for Disney. King Ludwig’s real life Bavarian castle, Nueschwanstien, appears to be a romanticized fairytale fantasy castle. In fact, it is not a fortification, but instead a pleasure palace created by King Ludwig and inspired by Germanic folklore. Disney’s Sleeping Beauty’s Castle indirectly references Nueschwanstien. Sleeping Beauty’s Castle wasn’t intended as a fortification either, but as a gift shop and restaurant.

I built my combination Sleeping Beauty’s Castle and Nueschwanstien out of Plexiglas and mirrors. These materials represent a departure for me since they weren’t

chosen to emulate the original material of the castle. I built it from Plexiglas and mirrors to add an extra - perhaps magical - dimension to the representation. These materials function illusionistically. Plexiglas and mirror pretend to be nonexistent or invisible materials reflecting their surroundings, all the while in fact, being quite visible. I titled the piece, *Crystal Palace Hidden Fortress*.

The last piece is titled *Last Stand at Big Thunder Mountain*. It is appropriated from Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, a run-a-way mine car ride at Disneyland, which in turn references a mountain in Utah. This is different from the others in that it is not a direct representation of the original source material but instead uses the source as a jumping off point for my own narrative. My piece suggests that the ride was converted into a post-apocalyptic fortified bunker. I created multiple points of interest on the sculpture that serve as plot points in the story, in the same way a ride has sections that tell the story. The plot points of *Last Stand at Big Thunder Mountain* include a toxic hot spring made of house paint and dripped wax, a hill side grave yard, Wild West lookout towers, and a reflective cavern filled with electrostatic globes.

The pop culture icon is the known quantity with which I start each piece. In each of Kubrick's films, the original idea for the film came from someone else's short story. It was from this point that he was able to tell his own story. This is my model too. The seed comes from a shared cultural symbol of personal significance but upon this I generate my own work.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Hench, John, and Peggy Van Pelt. *Designing Disney*. 1st ed. New York: Disney Editions, 2003

Ebert, R., and M. Corlis. *Great Movies*. 1st ed. New York: Broadway books, 2003

Hainley, B., D. Cooper, and A. Searle. *Tom Friedman*. 1st ed. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2001

Images

The Curse (Abe, Shuttle, Optimus) 2004

Cardboard, Hot Glue, Latex Paint, Wood Dimensions Variable



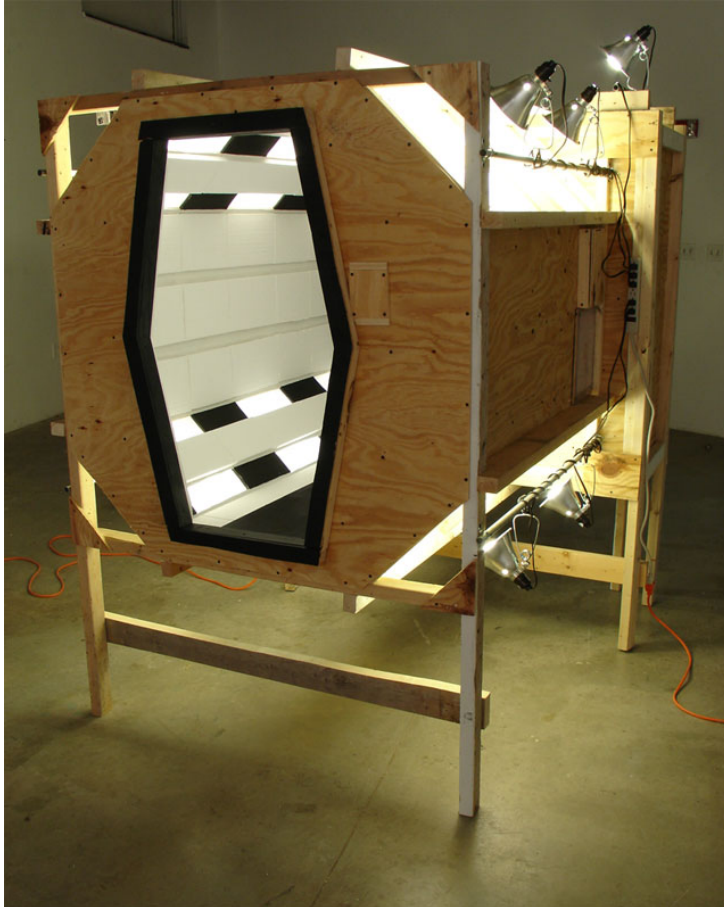
VHS 2005

Foam, Plexiglas, and latex paint 2ft x 4ft x 8ft



Airlock (Act I) 2005

Plywood, Plexiglas, Styrofoam, Rubber Matting, Fluorescent Lamps and Latex paint 5ft x
6ft x 4ft



Imagine Piano 2005

Plywood, Styrofoam, String, Latex Paint 5ft x 6ft x

3ft



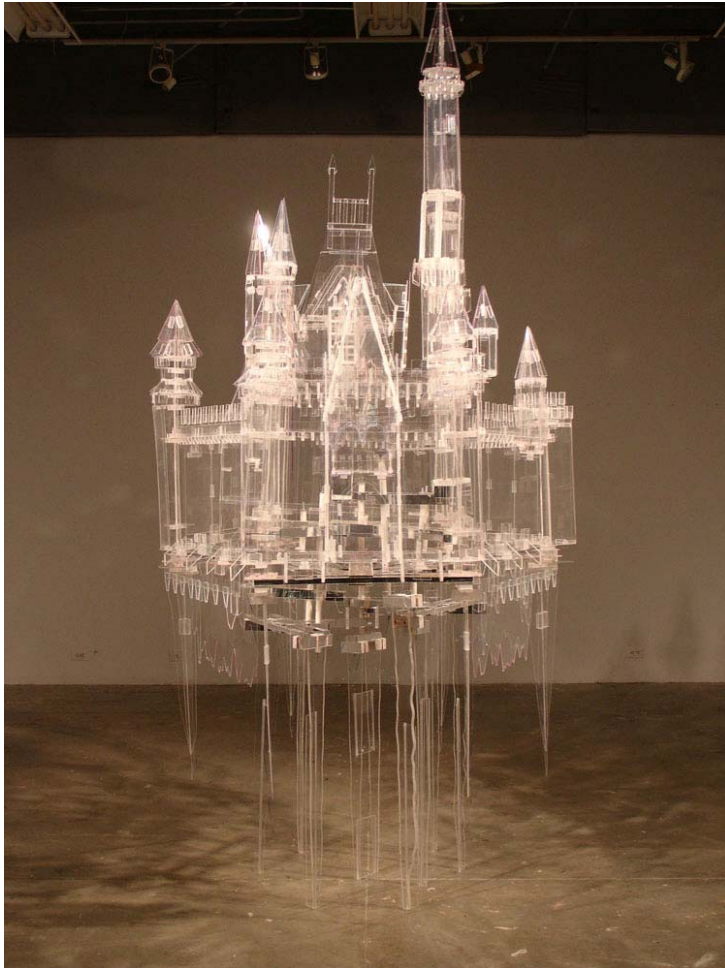
Mississippi Ark 2006

Wood, canvas, Styrofoam, cloth, cardboard 108" x 56" x 94"



Crystal Palace Hidden Fortress 2006

Plexiglas, Morror, Plywood, Hot Glue 120"x 60" 60"



VITA

Residencies

2006 Art Omi International Artists' Residency
 2005 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
 2001 911 Media Arts Center Artist In Residence Summer

Awards/Honors/Nominations

2006 MFA Graduate Assistantship Virginia Commonwealth University
 2005 Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University
 2005 MFA Scholarship Virginia Commonwealth University
 2005 MFA Graduate Assistantship Virginia Commonwealth University
 2004 MFA Scholarship Virginia Commonwealth University
 2002 Rockefeller New Media Fellowship Nomination
 2000 Distinction of Magna Cum Laude Cornish College Of the Arts
 1997-1999 Merit Scholarship Cornish College of the arts

Publications

2005 Mieser and Now, Fall Issue London, UK
 2005 Style Weekly, October 26th Richmond, VA
 2004 www.tank.tv, June/July issue London, UK

Solo Exhibitions

2006 *Thesis Exhibition* Anderson Gallery at VCU Richmond, VA
 2002 *Museum of Past Accomplishments* Woessner Alumni Gallery: Cornish College of The Arts, Seattle, WA
 2001 *David Herbert's Residency Exhibition* 911 Media Arts Center, Seattle, WA
 2000 *BFA Show* Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle, WA

Group Exhibitions

2006 *New American Talent* Arthouse at the Jones Center Austin, TX (Curated by Aimee Chang)
 2006 *Scarecrow Postmasters*, NY, New York (curated by David Hunt)
 2006 *The Sleeper Must Awaken* Flat International Richmond, VA
 2006 *The Seventh Side Of The Die* Alona Kagan Gallery, NY, New York
 2006 *Scope Art Fair* Keith Talent Gallery, NY, New York
 2006 *LA Art Fair* Keith Talent Gallery, Santa Monica, California
 2005 *Aqua Art Fair* Keith Talent Gallery, Miami, Florida
 2005 *Under-Lie* Keith Talent Gallery, London, UK

2005 *Candidacy Show* Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2005 *Record* Cornish College of the Arts Gallery, Seattle, WA

2004 *Polymorphously Perverse* Flat International, Richmond, VA

2004 *Moving Digital* 1506 Projects, Seattle, WA

2004 *Sea Legs* 1506 Projects, Seattle, WA

2004 *Carry-On* Tacoma Contemporary, Sea-Tac International Airport, Seattle, WA

2004 *From the Vaults* Consolidated Works, Seattle, WA

2004 *Pattern vs. Happenstance* Black Lab Gallery, Seattle, WA

2004 *International Shorts Program* Electronic Arts Program California State University, Chico, CA

2004 *RC Cola Presents the Royal Crown Players* University of Washington Theater, Seattle, WA

2004 *Hi/lo Film Festival* Killing My Lobster, San Francisco, CA

2004 *Electronic Arts Exchange* College Arts Association, Seattle, WA

2003 *Cornish Alumni Exhibition* Washington State Convention Center, Seattle, WA

2003 *MFF JEDNA MINUA*, Poznan, Poland

2003 *Festival Internacional del Cine Pobre*, Gibara, Cuba.

2002 *Cinema Rocks* 911 Media Arts Center, May 31st 2002, Seattle, WA

2001 *The Mary Alice Cooley Print Collection* Fisher Gallery, Seattle, WA

2001 *Popcorn 2001* Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA

2001 *Bellevue Art Museum Film and Video Festival* Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA

2001 *ASU Film and Video Festival* Arizona State University at the ASU Art Museum Phoenix, AZ

2001 *Peep* The Little Theater, Seattle, WA